冬の陽だまり

新アインクラッド第22層

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九里史生

New Aincrad 22nd Floor

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When fulldiving while wearing an AmuSphere, it seems that people feel either a falling or a floating sensation.

Keiko belonged to the latter group. Lying down on her bed in comfortable attire, she would call out the «Link Start» voice command and her consciousness, now separated from her body, would be immersed in a sensation as though she was floating straight upwards. An image of infinitely rising through a pure, white expanse, with eternal prisms of rainbow light cascading downwards.

Previously, when she considered a credible view she found on the net, that "the type of people who experience floating sensations feel that reality is harsh and wish to escape into the virtual world", she had ended up brooding over it, despite getting indignant over how baseless it was. She didn't feel that reality was bleak in the slightest—or so she had thought. After all, she had been imprisoned in a virtual world for a period of two years when she was twelve years of age, before finally being released slightly less than a year ago.

In comparison to that heartless, severe place, where her remaining hit points had been connected with her real life, reality was such a tranquil place. From April, she had even started attending the school set up for SAO survivors who were still minors in terms of age and had made many friends there. It does get a little awkward back home, but she's welcomed by her reserved father, her mother who's skilled at cooking and loves to sing, and her Munchkin breed cat, Pina, that she keeps. Here, she could read the continuation of the manga she likes (not to mention the two years worth of back issues!) and even get to eat actual cheesecakes. Hence, she had no reason to feel that reality was harsh whatsoever.

She shouldn't... but still.

While entrusting her body to the transient floating sensation, Keiko recalled the argument she had with her parents tens of minutes ago. To be specific, this was the first quarrel she had, since returning from SAO.

It was the thirty-first of December, 2025. New Year's Eve. The three members of the Ayano family, Keiko, along with her father and mother, had arranged to visit the home belonging to her father's parents in the Yamanashi prefecture, with the cat joining them as well. It was something that had been decided a month ago and at the time Keiko had obediently nodded as well when she first heard about it.

However right before departing, in the garage at home, she had ended up saying it. That she didn't want to go no matter what.

Her parents tried gently persuading her by saying how her grandfather, grandmother and her male cousins were all looking forward to meeting her, but as Keiko stuck to her obstinate behavior for tens of minutes, their words gradually grew harsher, resulting in her father uttering "Then just do as you like" before leaving in the car. Left alone at home, Keiko locked up the entranceway, returned to her room on the second floor and put on the AmuSphere after slumping onto her bed.

That's why this one and only particular dive might be a form of escape. Even so, that didn't matter. At the very least, crying in the virtual world rather than the real world would end without the need to worry about swollen eyes later on.

After turning into her Cait Sith character Silica, the place Keiko emerged was on a porch leading to a log house built on the shore of a large lake, on the twenty-second floor of the new Aincrad which

orbited through the skies of Alfheim. It appears to be early in the afternoon in the abode of the fairies, with plentiful warm sunlight beaming down upon the garden's lawn.

This wasn't a player home that belonged to her, but since she was able to get herself registered on the sub-owner list, she could freely log in and out anywhere within the premises of the homestead. That said, she takes the original two owners into consideration, making sure not to start off indoors, just in case.

Shortly after Silica's dive, a light blue glimmer appeared in the space right beside her which coalesced, before changing into the shape of a small dragon.

Though defined as small, that's only when compared to the larger versions of the dragon race mobs, with its wingspan stretching close to over a meter. However, with its entire body covered in downy fur in a shade of light blue that matched its two round, ruby eyes, there was no sign of ferocity in its outward appearance.

"Here, Pina."

The moment Silica reached out with her two hands, the small dragon, which had the same name as her pet cat, dove into her arms after letting out a single coo, "kururu!". She tightly hugged its fluffy body and it started licking her right cheek with its tiny tongue. Pina, with an AI at the level of familiars, or in other words, «tamed monsters», was not terribly smart, but at times, it reacted as though it could read Silica's mind. This was one such time, and while it licked Silica's face, it continuously let out a "kuru... ruru..." from its throat, as if it was showing its concern.

"...Thank you, I'm alright now. I'm fine now, after meeting you, Pina."

While whispering that, she placed Pina who was unexpectedly light for its size onto her head. Its feathery wings tickled those cat ears unique to the race of Cait Sith and its long tail wrapped around her neck, much like a muffler.

Enveloped in a warmth that seemed impossible for a moving object in a virtual world, Silica felt herself slowly perking up from the chagrin of the dispute she had with her parents, as she strode to the door of the log house.

Upon touching the doorknob, a crisp click rang out, representing the door unlocking. Gently pulling it open, she headed in and called out, "Good afternoon". As expected, there was no reply. She could open up the Friend List from her Main Menu to check on their login status, but she could believe that there wouldn't be anyone here without needing to resort to that. After all, it was New Year's Eve...

However, just in case, Silica minded her manners and said her greetings for intruding before she entered. Closing the door, she headed for the main room on the left side of the hallway.

The moment she stepped into the living room, with a breadth impossible for a detached house in reality, or at least, for an average one in Tokyo's special wards, Pina slowly flew off from her head. The reasons for a familiar to leave its master without orders should be either due to detecting monsters closing in, or having its intimacy value drop from not being fed enough and changing to a defiant status; that said, there was a possible third reason when considering this room in this house.

Conscious of her virtual heart now beating harder, Silica chased Pina as it flew, flapping its wings. She went around a huge log that was used as a pillar and cast her eyes towards the south facing window.

Placed in a spot with lemon-yellow sunshine falling onto it, was a solitary rocking chair. Atop that chair which was moving constantly and rather gently without making any noise lay a Spriggan with black hair, clothed in black, with his eyes closed. His sleeping expression was far from the one that he shows in battle, here showing signs of boyish innocence.

Pina, who had flown off Silica's head, circled once above the Spriggan before it landed near his stomach. Folding its wings, it coiled up its head and tail before finally falling asleep. No, it's a familiar, so that ought to be merely «looking as though it's asleep», but the "kyururu, kyururu" sounds of it breathing in its sleep was no illusion.

"...Geez, Pina."

After muttering under her breath, Silica continued to stand as she gazed at the sleeping poses of that person and that animal. Her beating heart gently slowing down from the somewhat quick rate it had been and a calm tranquility soon spread within Silica as well. For a short while, the spice of remorse flowed around her while she took shelter in the warmth.

This went on for close to thirty seconds before she regained her wits and looked around her. If he, the owner of this house, was logged in, it was likely that either the other owner, an Undine healer, or his real life little sister, a Sylphid magic swordswoman, was around as well, but she could find no traces of other players. Cait Sith were the race bestowed with the highest level of perception ability among the nine races, so she should know if there was anyone else in the house. Of course, it's different if hiding spells or skills were used, but there should be no reason to hide inside the house in that manner.

—Having decided that, Silica was still at a loss for several seconds before carrying a single chair from the dining table to the side of the rocking chair. She softly sat down after aligning them.

She sprawled her body towards the left and stared hard at the profile of the sleeping Spriggan's face right in front of her.

In mere seconds, Silica could feel her eyelids weighing down as well. Having that boy sound asleep in this room releases a sort of magical power that causes sleepiness in the surrounding players—or at least, that was the accepted conclusion among her friends. However, she must not allow herself to succumb to this magic. Silica had the «Automatically Disconnect When Asleep Function» set to fifteen minutes, so if she fell asleep she would soon be logged out. Going through the connection sequence once again was certainly a bother, but her main reason was to not waste this precious time available. The chance she could be alone with that sleeping boy—generally were no longer possible, not since the night of the day that they met in a certain different floating castle.

Come to think of it, that had happened nearly two years ago.

She had lost her familiar, Pina, and even her own life had been like a candle flickering in the wind when Silica was saved by the black-clothed swordsman, Kirito.

He didn't just protect Silica, but was even willing to help revive the once-killed Pina. She still remembers that single day of adventure, when they went to retrieve the item that could resurrect a familiar, down to its very last detail. The gigantic flower monsters with tentacles sprouting out from them and the orange players that assaulted them on the way back were extremely scary, but those memories were all important to her.

—No, it wasn't just that day.

With her hands raised to her chest while tightly grasping each other, Silica began to ponder while sitting on the chair.

All the days they had adventured and played together since she first met Pina gave off a special sparkle within her memories. That radiance was so vivid that it could cause the entire time she spent in the real world to pale in comparison. Of course, she could meet up with Pina whenever she wanted if she dived into ALO, and she was conscious of the fact of that already being a blessing by itself—

after all, Pina really should have disappeared when SAO was cleared—but at times, she wondered about something.

About how it would be nice if this side was the true reality instead.

A thought that couldn't be told to anyone, one that definitely couldn't be released from her lips. A thought that would betray her parents who were worried to death over her for those two years when she was trapped in that death game and enthusiastically celebrated her return. But. But still—

The teardrops that gathered in her lower eyelashes without her noticing faintly pattered onto the chair's armrest.

Perhaps due to that noise which could barely be called one, the black-haired Spriggan—Kirito languidly opened his eyes. Silica frantically turned back to face forward before blinking countless times to dissipate the remaining tears effect. She stayed frozen in that position for several seconds before she heard his voice.

"...Huh, Silica? When did you get here?"

She timidly turned to the left and was met with the sleepy-looking face of Kirito's right before her own.

"Go-Good afternoon, Kirito-san. Erm, fift... five minutes earlier or so, I think."

"Woah, you should have just woken me up."

Getting up with a flustered expression, Kirito seemed to have finally noticed Pina on top of him. With a gentle smile, he lightly caressed the area near the base of its neck with his fingertips. The small dragon rolled over while still asleep, showing its belly that was of a shade slightly more pale than its back and shook its tail to plead for more rubbing.

Silica exchanged another look with Kirito before they both broke into soft laughter.

Upon settling down, words flowed from between her lips, almost as though it was only natural.

"...Earlier, I had a fight with my parents."

Kirito raised his eyebrows slightly before calmly asking.

"Despite it being New Year's Eve? Or maybe because it's New Year's Eve?"

"Because it's New Year's Eve... I believe. Actually, I was supposed to go over to my grandfather's place in Yamanashi today, but just when we were leaving, I went ahead and said that I didn't want to go... ah, i-it's not like I thought that the popular hunting areas in ALO might be empty on New Year's Eve, I didn't do it for anything like that."

"Haha, you would be let down if that *was* your true reason. It seems that there were loads of players with the same thought, so it's practically no more empty than usual."

"...So you've checked it out already, huh. Or rather, Kirito-san, that was what you were here for...?"

Silica looked up at him for a brief moment and the Spriggan shook his head with a ruffled expression.

"Th-That's totally not it. I could have been wanting to test out the sharpness of «Excaliber» that I got the other day, or maybe showing it off to Eugene, so that's definitely not-"

"I didn't ask about all that, geez."

"I-I see. Wait, that's not it, we were talking about your home visit, Silica."

Kirito casually cleared his throat, returned to a serious expression and stared straight at Silica.

His avatar was the only one among her friends from the past SAO period with a different face and figure. However, those jet black eyes deep enough to suck you in remained the same. She could not tear her eyes away and they continued looking at each other, before Kirito finally spoke in a whisper.

"...You don't want to... meet with someone?"

"That's right."

She nodded at her innermost thoughts, hidden from even her parents, being seen through without any sign of surprise.

"It's not just one person though, but multiple. I don't want to meet my male cousins. ...I went back for the Bon Festival the other time, that was when I met them for the first time in three years, but... that night, when all of us children were left alone, everyone wanted to hear about it..."

"About what happened in SAO, huh..."

"Yes. ...I understand they didn't have any bad intentions. If our positions were reversed, I might have asked about this and that as well. But... I didn't want to. I really didn't want to talk about that world."

"That's because... those memories were awful? Or maybe..."

He cut his words off then, and Silica looked back at his face, this time with a trifling amount of surprise.

"Kirito-san, there are times when you're extremely dense, and times when you're extremely sharp, huh."

"R-Really?"

"Really. ...As you guessed, the reason why I didn't want to talk about it is because those memories are really important to me. But I didn't want my parents to know that was how I thought... so I told my cousins about how scary that world was and how glad I was when I escaped from it; those were all I talked about. But as I continued speaking, it was like I was sullying something precious to me... So, at that time, I decided that I wouldn't talk about SAO again. But if I go to my grandfather's place, I would definitely meet them again, so... I..."

When Silica spoke no further, her lips trembling, Kirito took the action of extending his right hand in exchange for words. Poof, he placed his palm onto Silica's head, gently stroking the base of her cat ears akin to how he did earlier to Pina.

The triangular ears and long tail unique to the Cait Sith race were able to feel through some sort of mechanism. Especially the tail which produces a jolting stimulus flowing down the spine alongside the utmost «sense of oddity» when strongly gripped; but on the other hand, caressing the ears definitely did not bring about an unpleasant feeling.

It seems that her tension eased off little by little as she immersed herself in the strange sense of pleasure not found in reality. Faced with Silica who was loosening the stiffness in her shoulders with her eyes half-closed, Kirito asked about an unexpected matter.

"Silica, you were twelve back when SAO started, weren't you?"

"...Yes, that's right. I was in the second term of my sixth year in primary school."

"I see. Did the Nerve Gear belong to you? Or perhaps, your father...?"

"It was mine. That said, it's not like I bought it myself or got my parents to buy it for me; I got it as a prize from a magazine. Along with the software for SAO. It was the first and last time I won something that expensive."

"Oh! Those must have been amazing odds... perhaps even more lucky than me when I was chosen for the beta test. Ah, no, I'm not sure if you could call that lucky, though..."

Silica unintentionally giggled at those faltering words that he had added on.

"If that was supposed to be unlucky, it would be the punishment for lying about my age when I applied. ...At least, that was what I often thought right after I got trapped in SAO. That it would be nice if I hadn't won the Nerve Gear; that it would be nice if it was some other software; things like that..."

"I see... —But if that was the case, you sure were amazing, being able to leave the Beginning City. And almost all of the kids around your age lived together without leaving the city too."

"No, that actually might... be the reason why I left the city. After all, while I was cursing my fate at an inn there, in the Beginning City, winning the Nerve Gear could become the worst misfortune I have had in my life... so I made the decision to definitely find something that would make me glad to have come to this world, and that's why I left the city. It was considerably much later than Kirito-san and Asuna-san though."

Upon hearing that, Kirito returned his glance back to himself while rubbing Silica's cat ears. On top of his black shirt, the small, light blue dragon was sound asleep with its face up as always.

"...I'm glad you found it."

He murmured, and Silica nodded with a smile on her face.

"Yes. Meeting Pina was... and that's not all. Meeting Kirito-san, Asuna-san, Liz-san and the rest, and becoming friends with all of you too. That's why, to me... those memories from that world are simply irreplaceable."

The topic made a full circle back to the start, but she remained calm. Soaking in the sensation of those virtual appendages being stroked, Silica slowly contemplated the problem she faced and opened her mouth.

"That said, it's not like I didn't want to return back to reality. It's all thanks to Kirito-san and everyone else trying their best to clear SAO that I am able to live in peace like this now, and I'm really glad about that. But... somehow... I feel like something is different. Something in this real world... feels just a little... different. My cousins who wanted to hear about SAO too... Papa and Mama who always look at me with worrying eyes... even my cat, Pina, is somehow different... from the past..."

After expressing all of that, Silica became aware of what caused the biggest sense of discomfort for the first time. And that was herself. The one who had already turned fifteen this year, Ayano Keiko of the real world. Compared to the avatar that was taken verbatim from the SAO era, her real body had grown quite a bit and her figure had changed.

I see, she thought. It's only natural to feel that something is different. After all, I must be afraid of these various changes deep down in my heart. Afraid of the time in reality constantly flowing past at such a forceful speed. Afraid of what is yet to come.

"...I'm... scared. Of things changing, things disappearing... that someday, a time might come when I can't meet Kirito-san, everyone else, or Pina in this world anymore... If that's the case, I would rather just, once again....."

Be trapped here. Forever. And for time to stop.

But that wish was not one that could exit her mouth. The black-haired swordsman reflected in her eyes cleared SAO with his life on the line and freed over six thousand players, inclusive of Silica. There was no way she could say that she would like to be taken prisoner again by the virtual world in front of him.

Silica cast her eyes downwards and bit her lips hard.

The fingers rubbing her ears came to a sudden stop. His hand did not leave but rather, snugly enveloped her right ear with his palm. The core of her mind felt as if it went numb and the moment Silica loosened the tension in her entire body once more in response to that, she heard his voice.

"...I'm happy that I was able to meet you here and now today, Silica. The next time too, and the time after that too; that's definitely what I'll believe. That's why... thank you, Silica. For staying alive until that time we met in the «Forest of Wandering», two years ago."

"Eh....."

As she glanced upwards at those unanticipated words, Kirito's smiling face was right before hers.

The meaning behind that gratitude belatedly sank in.

Though she hasn't even actually tried to think about it, Kirito should also be suffering from difficulties and hardships of his own in these days. Perhaps he might have recalled that memory during his bleak moments as well. Of that girl, who he met and saved the life of, deep in the forest consumed by night. That the girl was alive, living on peacefully in the real world.

That time was still flowing for her, second after second—

Silica raised both of her hands up, took Kirito's right hand which was covering her triangular ear and brought it before her face.

The dark tone of his skin, characteristic to Spriggans, was different from that of the Kirito from the SAO era. However, the warmth remained exactly the same. The hand that covered Silica's shoulders as she cried at the end of the adventures on that day was exactly the same.

In actual fact, many things will change, even in the virtual world. Thinking about it, it was because she left the Beginning City, demanding change, that Silica was able to meet Pina, and thus, Kirito. However, there certainly are things that don't change there. Important things will definitely not leave her behind.

That probably applies to the real world as well. The way her male cousins and parents treated Silica was different from before. However, their feelings were... their feelings for Silica remain unchanged within all of them. And thus, an unchanging self inside of Ayano Keiko definitely exists, with time flowing through her one day at a time.

With Kirito's right hand wrapped within her two palms, Silica took a long, deep breath. She brought them up to her sight and then asked of the slightly embarrassed-looking Spriggan.

"Kirito-san, are you free today?"

"Mo-More or less... I'm free enough to take a nap in a place like this, after all. Dad's coming back from America late at night, but I should be free until then..."

"Then please have a New Year's Eve date with me."

It was a line she would normally never manage to say, even if she were to try with all her might, but perhaps backed by the thought of "I'm not a kid anymore", it came out without any difficulty. Upon hearing that, Kirito let his sight wander for a moment, but soon nodded with a smile.

"Sure, if someone like me will do. Well, shall we go to the main city of the twenty-fifth floor, then? Or the lower world? It should be right around the Undine territory at the moment..."

"No, let's have it at Ikebukuro, one hour from now!"

"Alright, then Ikebuku... eh, eeh!? In the real world!?"

"I won't allow you to take those words back now."

Silica tightly gripped Kirito's hand before letting it go and spoke while grinning.

"I'll go to Yamanashi by train after that. Papa and the rest must be worried, after all."

Against that, Kirito blinked countless times before he nodded with a smile as well.

"I see. Then I'll send you off until the Shinjuku station."

"Ah, you didn't actually think that would be enough, did you! That's only four stops on the Yamanote Line, isn't it!"

"It's only one if you go by the Saikyou Line."

"You're horrible! You can't call that a date!"

Perhaps due to the intensifying commotion from the exchange, Pina awoke on top of Kirito and let out a big yawn. An iridescent bubble shot out from its mouth and flitted through the southern window, flying far, far away into the skies as it brilliantly shimmered in the sunlight.